

# California Child Support Reform Update: Meeting the Challenges and Helping Support Families

BY CURTIS L. CHILD



**C**alifornia has successfully completed the first major phase of reforming its child support program. This includes transitioning all local child support programs out of district attorneys offices, converting all local programs onto federally approved interim automation systems, establishing a major customer service initiative and adopting regulations for key program areas. This has taken place with little disruption in program services and significant increases in program performance.

California's child support program – the nation's largest, serving two million families – has had a troubled history, with critics ranging from the State Legislature and independent auditors to child support advocates and families.

The program was operated independently by 58 county district attorney offices, with little state oversight. It did not serve parents or children in a fair, uniform or consistent manner.

The state's first attempt to develop a statewide automation system was a costly failure. These factors all contributed to unacceptably low child support collections.

## Reform Legislation

In 1999, the Legislature passed and Governor Gray Davis signed groundbreaking child support reform legislation establishing the California Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) in 2000. I was appointed by Governor Davis to head the new department and lead the reform efforts. Our mission: restructure the program and oversee a state-directed, locally-delivered child support program uniformly across the 58 counties.

## Uniform Policies, Procedures and Regulations

The new department faced challenges that required immediate attention beginning with development of uniform policies and procedures. DCSS created the collaborative Policies, Procedures and Practices (P3) Project, to develop policy recommendations on a broad variety of child support issues. P-3 involved over 130 child support stakeholders, and generated over 300 recommendations.

DCSS then began developing regulations governing all aspects of the child support program. Ten regulations packages are now in place and all key regulations are scheduled to be adopted by Fall 2002. For the first time ever, these detailed regulations provide direction to local program administrators to ensure a uniform statewide program.

## Transitions and Conversions

California's child support program passed a major milestone on July 1, 2002 with the transition of all local programs from district attorneys offices to independent local child support agencies (LCSAs) operating under the leadership of DCSS. The local program transitions – finished six

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months ahead of schedule, with little disruption in services and with annual program savings of over \$13 million – have been a complete success in focusing the child support program on family self-sufficiency while at the same time using law enforcement remedies when appropriate.

The transition process also revealed potential opportunities for regionalization of child support program operations to achieve additional economies and efficiencies. Eleven counties have now regionalized into 5 regions.

DCSS has also been moving ahead on automation. First, DCSS, in partnership with the state's tax collection agency, the Franchise Tax Board, is developing the California Child



complaint resolution process to resolve customer complaints within 30 days and a state administrative hearing process for customers with unresolved complaints was implemented. These programs are now operating successfully across the state.

DCSS conducted a statewide customer service satisfaction survey of custodial and non-custodial parents. The survey, which establishes baseline information

on customer satisfaction, will help each LCSA develop a comprehensive customer service program tailored to local needs.

Collaboration and partnership is a cornerstone of the reform agenda. DCSS and the LCSAs meet regularly with parents and advocates. In addition, DCSS has meetings with other key stakeholders, including child support commissioners and family law facilitators.

### **Performance Enhancement Projects**

In order to continually improve program performance and customer service, DCSS, in collaboration with the LCSAs, is finalizing development of a Quality Assurance and Performance Improvement (QAPI) Program. The program, which will be implemented statewide, will combine performance and compliance reviews into a year round process for continuously improving the quality and effectiveness of all aspects of the child support program, including program processes and services, administrative and financial services and customer service. Through QAPI's results-based approach to program improvement, statewide and local performance targets will be established.

DCSS has also developed and implemented an initiative to track undistributed child support collections (UDC) uniformly across the state. The

initiative has identified both the accurate amount of undistributed collections and the reasons for their accrual. Under DCSS leadership, LCSAs are working to reduce or eliminate undistributed collection balances owed to families. The UDC totals should drop below 1% of distributed collections by the end of this quarter.

Finally, California is just completing a study of the child support arrears owed in the state and the debtors who owe them. This comprehensive project includes in-depth research by the Urban Institute and proposed recommendations for maximizing collections and minimizing the build-up of future arrears developed in collaboration with key child support stakeholders. The Collectibility Project demonstrates an important aspect of reform – use the best research and data available to make critical business decisions. A final report of the Collectibility Project and recommendations is scheduled for release by the end of the year.

These are only some of the performance enhancement projects underway. Continually striving for improvement is now the regular course of business for California's child support program. Early on, critics worried that collections and program performance would suffer because restructuring efforts would shift focus away from current program activities. Quite to the contrary, in the midst of massive restructuring activities, program performance is up across the board and collections – now over \$2 billion a year – continue to increase.

State and local child support personnel, along with a broad group of stakeholders, are working together to make California's child support program the best in the nation.

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Support Automation System (CCSAS) — the single, statewide automation system. Developing the statewide system at the same time the child support program is being restructured presents a unique opportunity to construct an automated system that will more efficiently support the redesigned program. The performance-based procurement is almost complete, and DCSS anticipates entering into the contract for development and implementation of CCSAS by Spring of 2003.

At the same time, DCSS has successfully converted the LCSAs from over 30 disparate automation systems to one of six federally approved interim automated systems. The conversions, which occurred while all the other program restructuring has been occurring, did not significantly impact program operations or services to customers. DCSS is now looking to further reduce the number of interim systems from six to four within the next year.

### **Customer Service and Collaboration**

Customer service is a top priority. Each LCSA was given funding to improve customer service. An Ombudsperson program to help customers navigate the child support system was established. There are now over 190 Ombudspersons in the LCSAs. Effective July 1, 2001, a